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THE HUMAN CONNECTION--LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.

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NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSN., WASHINGTON, D.C.

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THE AUTHOR CHARACTERIZES THIS BULLETIN AS A MESSAGE ON LANGUAGE. THE MESSAGE IS FACILITATED BY (1) A FLUID AND IMAGINATIVE USE OF TYPESETTING, (2) A NARRATIVE-FORM STORY, AND (3) A STORY-PLOT THAT INVOLVES SEVERAL LANGUAGE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS. ALTHOUGH THE STORY COMPRISES THE ENTIRE BULLETIN, THE PURPOSE OF THE BULLETIN IS NOT JUST TO TELL A STORY. ITS PURPOSE, IN PART, IS TO ILLUSTRATE THE DIFFICULTIES LANGUAGE CAN CREATE AND THE BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOURSELF AND OTHERS THAT THE PROPER USE OF LANGUAGE CAN PROVIDE. LANGUAGE, AS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE, CAN BE EITHER A SOURCE OF UNDERSTANDING OR OF ALIENATION. THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER IN THE STORY STRUGGLES WITH TURNING HER INITIAL ALIENATION FROM A STRONG-WILLED LITTLE BOY INTO UNDERSTANDING OF HIS INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY. BY DISCUSSING THE PROBLEM WITH THE PRINCIPAL, WITH OTHER TEACHERS AT A TEACHERS' MEETING, AND WITH HERSELF, SHE COMES TO UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THE BOY'S ABILITIES AND, AT THE SAME TIME, HER OWN LACK OF INSIGHT. SOON SHE IS ABLE TO CHANNEL THE BOY'S INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS TO THE BENEFIT OF ALL. THE STORY POINTS OUT THAT LANGUAGE AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION IS ONLY EFFECTIVE WHEN THE LISTENER LISTENS CAREFULLY. THE IMPORT OF THE COMMUNICATION OFTEN GOES BEYOND THE SPOKEN WORD. ANOTHER LESSON THE STORY INTRODUCES IS THE GREAT NEED FOR FLEXIBLE, CREATIVE, AND IMAGINATIVE INSTRUCTION IN GUIDING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT. THE VERBAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN ARE AS DIFFERENT AS THEIR SOCIAL PERSONALITIES. INTERACTION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE IS AN AREA OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION THAT NEEDS MORE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION IN ALL ASPECTS OF TEACHING. THIS DOCUMENT IS AVAILABLE FROM THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, 1201 SIXTEENTH STREET, N.W., WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 FOR $1.50. (WD)

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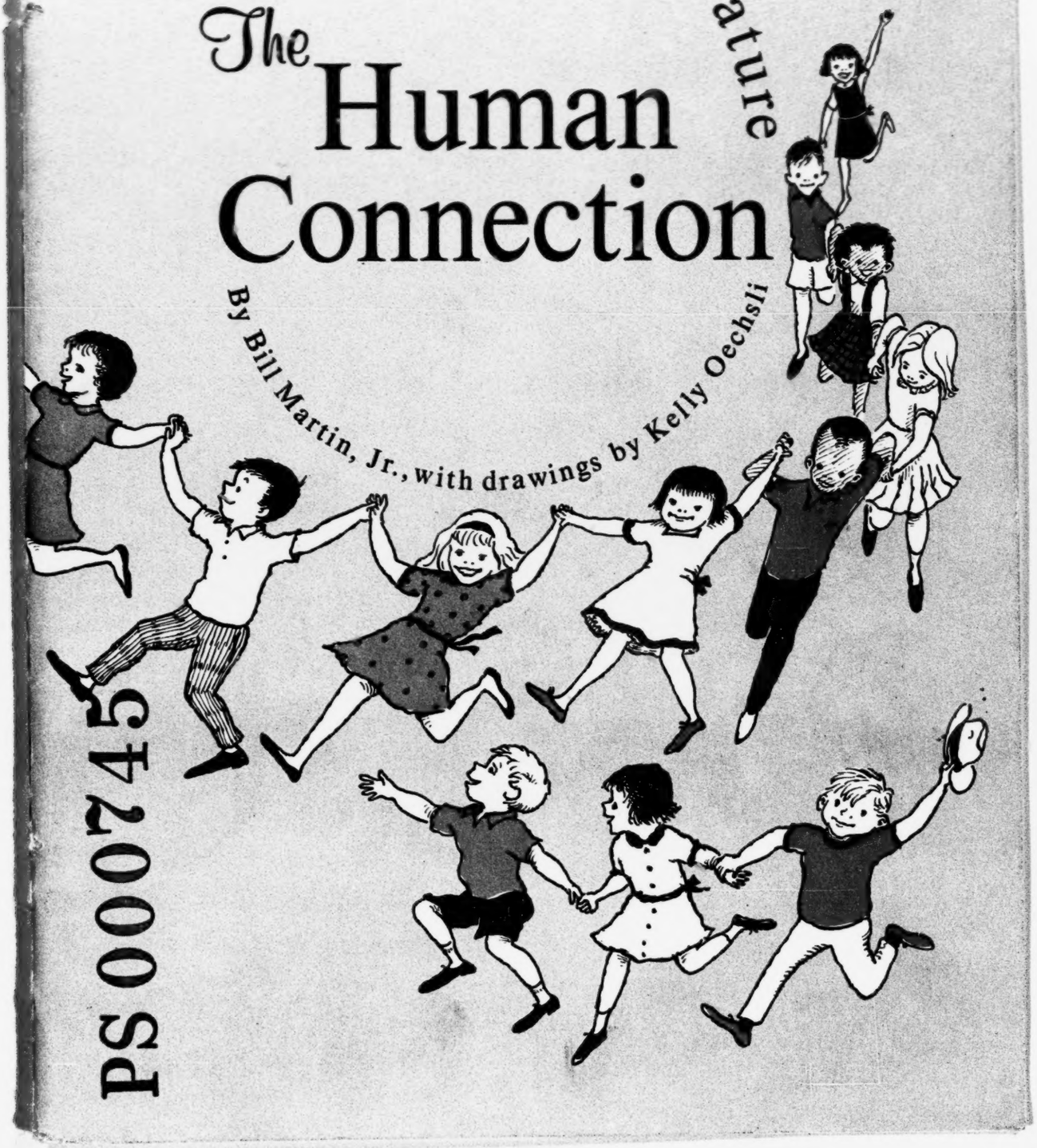
language and literature

The Human Connection

By Bill Martin, Jr., with drawings by Kelly Oechsli



Josephine
Seth
Rose
Hiles
Bubber
Marta
Angela
Reed
Chyrul
Patricia
John
Hortense

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National Education Association of the United States, Washington, D.C.

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Foreword

Everything in this bulletin is a message on language:

the content,
the way the type is set,
the teacher's introspection,
the confrontation between the teacher and the children,
the face-to-face discussion, the faculty meeting,
the teacher's wrestle with behavioral change,
and the language activities in kindergarten.

The message is both literal and symbolic.
You are free to glean from it
whatever involves you in dialogue
about the nature of language and related classroom practices.

As you read, you may wonder
why a bulletin on language and literature
that spans the years from nursery school through elementary school
has a narrative setting in kindergarten.
A survey of existing materials and beliefs
about the teaching of language and literature in the elementary grades
indicated that our minds are more open to curriculum explorations
before the onus of *pupil achievement* is upon us.

You also may wonder why there is no bibliography
of books for professional growth and books for classroom use.
It was omitted so that there would be no detraction
from the invitation to dialogue,
which is the purpose of this pamphlet.

Bill Martin Jr.

The Disconnection

Suddenly, there he stood, glaring at me.
I was not unaccustomed to children's display of emotion
on the first day of kindergarten,
but this youngster was so obviously hostile
that I was alarmed. "Hello," I said.
"What's your name? I am Mrs. Hoxie."

"I know your name," he said. "Everybody knows your name."

I wasn't sure whether this was good or bad,
but I pursued, "And what is your name?"

He responded with *silence*,
looking me directly in the eye.
I wasn't sure whether he was contemplating
the joy of anonymity
or whether he was looking for a crack
in my insistence
to learn his name.

"If you
don't tell me,"
I said feebly,
"I won't know
who you are."

He gave me a look
that said
I had just uttered
a stupid statement.

Then he bit his lip thoughtfully and announced as if it were an event of great importance, "My name is John."

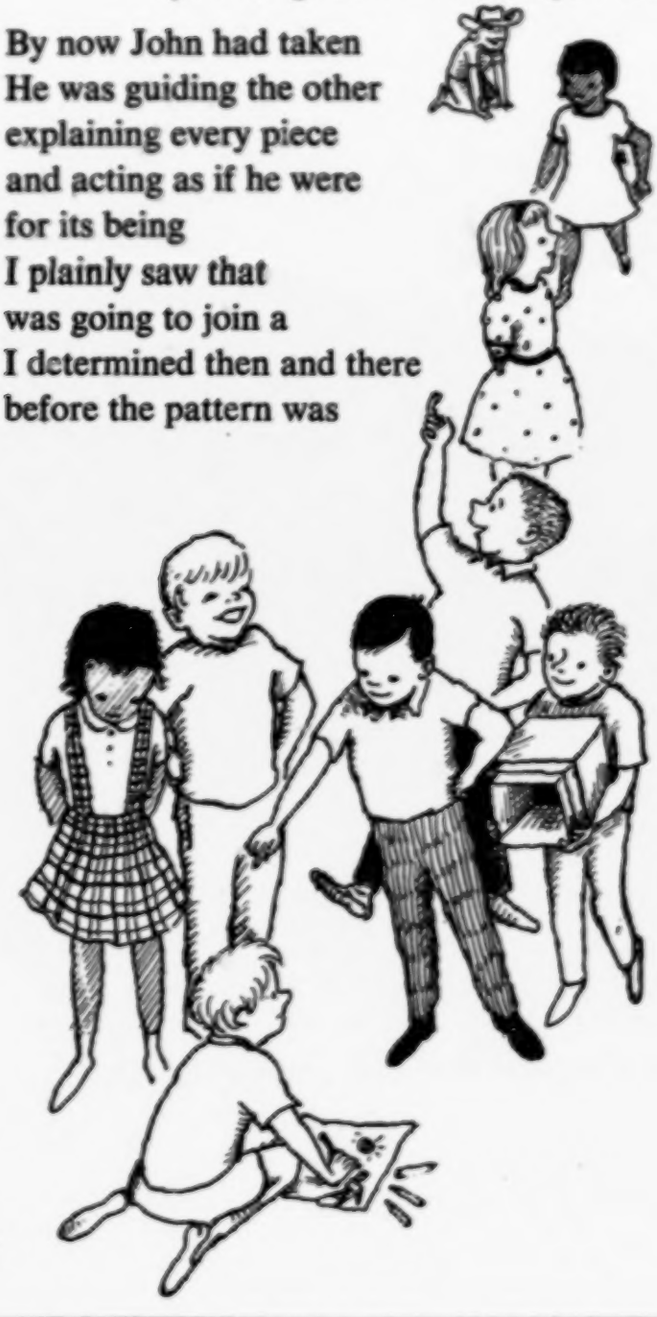
"John what?" I persisted.

"John Fulston." Then he added, with a twist of his shoulders that resembled a smirk, "My father is the new superintendent."

Obviously, this last pronouncement called for a response,
but what does one say when cornered
by a five-year-old? "Oh," I said guardedly. "Please come in, John.
Some of the other children are already here."

It crossed my mind that John had been assigned
to Miss Christy's kindergarten,
but there is so much indefiniteness on the first day of school
that I chose to let John remain with me that morning
rather than to risk further conflict with him
by moving him immediately across the hall.

By now John had taken charge of the room.
He was guiding the other children around,
explaining every piece of equipment
and acting as if he were personally responsible
for its being in our kindergarten.
I plainly saw that *anyone who defied him*
was going to join a fraternity of outcasts.
I determined then and there to halt his takeover
before the pattern was imposed on the class.



That first morning
was a tug-of-war
between John and me.
He rebutted
everything I said
until my composure
was undermined
and the least
further provocation
would have triggered
an overly defensive
action that
I might regret.

I mustn't let this happen, I kept telling myself,
or I'll lose rapport with the rest of the children.
I knew from experience
the difficulty of restoring a constructive atmosphere
after the class has seen a teacher "fall apart."

At noon, Mrs. Fulston appeared
at the door to collect John.
She introduced herself
in a direct, neighborly way
that one could expect of a woman
who had grown up
in a small New Hampshire village.
I liked her immediately.

"I suppose
I should say
I'm sorry for you,"
she said honestly.
"John has always
been difficult
to handle,
so we,
Mr. Fulston and I,
requested that John
be put in your room,
not Miss Christy's,
since you've had
more experience."

It's not an easy role, I thought,
being the superintendent's wife
and having a child like John
enrolled in the same school system,
but Mrs. Fulston handles it well.

"Oh, John and I will get along," I said warmly. "Won't we, John?"
The moment I drew John into the conversation, I realized
that I had made a mistake. It gave him
another chance to challenge me,
which he promptly did
with a skeptical shrug of his shoulders.

"Come on, Mom," he said. "Let's get going."

If I had known then what I know now,
I would have made different plans
as I thought over the day's events and projected
what I would do about John on the morrow.
Even though I had taught for fourteen years,
I felt thoroughly threatened by this kind of child.
I couldn't dismiss him from my mind.
Off and on through the night,
I found myself thinking of ways
that I could bend John to school routine
without incurring his anger.

My internal dialogue was so nagging
that I had to admit John worried me,
but I was nonetheless determined
that he would not get the upper hand
a second day.

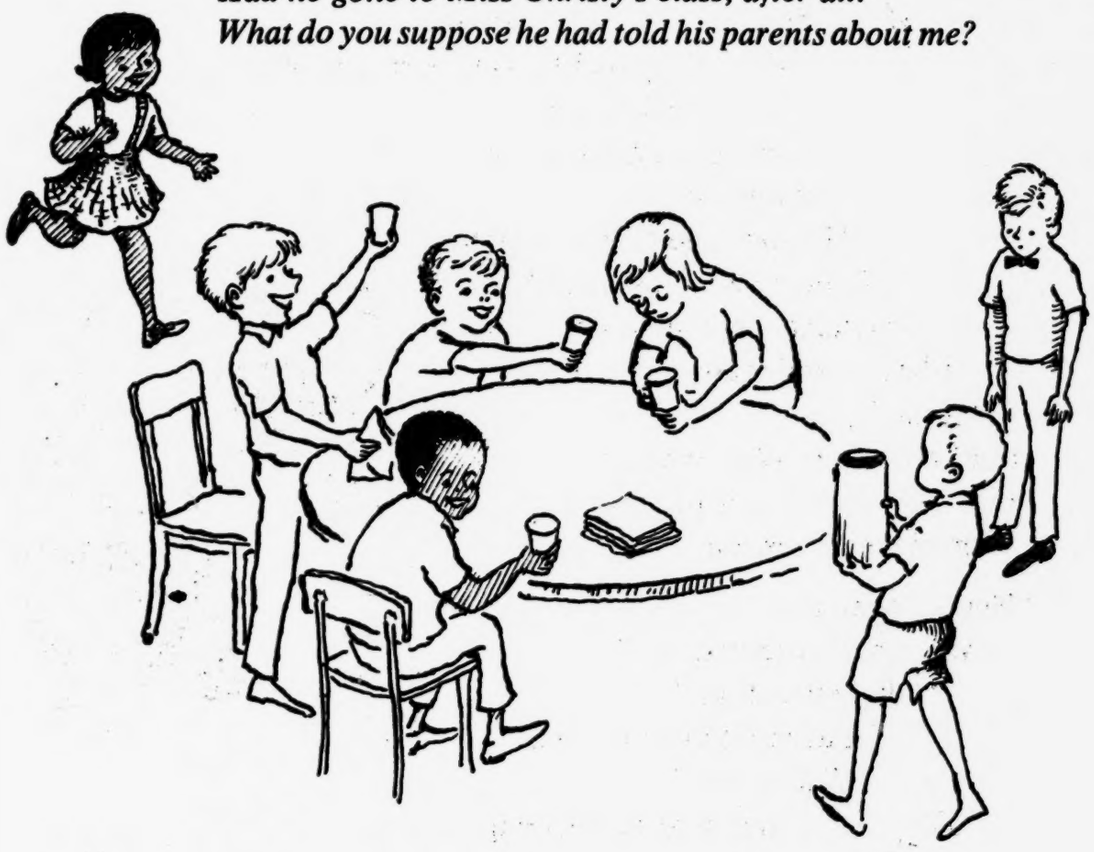
I resolved that nothing he said or did
would unnerve me
and that I would proceed quietly but firmly
to divest his pronouncements
of any effect on me or the children.
I would establish
myself as the
authority,
once and
for all.

By morning I was prepared
for John's entry.
I found myself eager for the
day's encounter
when the first children
appeared,
some with mothers, some
alone.
I enjoyed looking earnestly into
each child's face,
associating his first and
last name.
This was one of my strengths.
I never had to ask a child
his name a second time.
I had intentionally perfected
this skill
after reading in Walt Whitman
that a child's name is his most
precious possession.

"Hello, Juanita!
My, what a pretty dress!"
"Oh, hello, Roger!
What's that in your hand?
A surprise?"
"And here comes Ginger!
Is this your mother?
Hello, Mrs. Grabowski."

All at once I realized
that the day had begun
—without John.
This was a real disappointment to me
because my plans for dealing with him
had been so well laid.

As I talked and sang and arranged
with the children
in the course of the morning,
I, at the same time, was thinking about John.
Where was he? Why hadn't he come today?
Had he gone to Miss Christy's class, after all?
What do you suppose he had told his parents about me?



We were in the middle of having juice—
with its possibilities for catastrophe—
when John sauntered in.
Without an acknowledgment of any kind,
he got a paper cup from the dispenser
and came quickly to his table
just in time to be served.

"Good morning, John," I said reservedly,
"And where have you been?
You know
you're late,
don't you?"

"Oh, I'm always late,"
he answered casually.
"We always have a late breakfast
at our house."

My anger flared. I wanted to shake him!
Here was this whippersnapper, John Fulston,
upstaging me already!
Just then, Angela spilled her juice in her lap
and burst into tears. Perhaps that was fortunate.
At least it gave me a chance to retreat
without saying anything to John
that I might have regretted later.
I waited until noon to make my move.
As John prepared to leave, I called him aside.

"John, you were an hour and a half late this morning.
Tomorrow when you come to school,
I want you to bring your father with you.
He and you and I will have a talk."

So that he wouldn't forget,
I pinned a note in an envelope to his jacket.
John seemed totally unconcerned.
He solemnly unpinned the note,
put it in his pocket and went on his way.

We were headed for a showdown—John and I.
What I didn't know was that the showdown
would prove to be a turning point in my life.

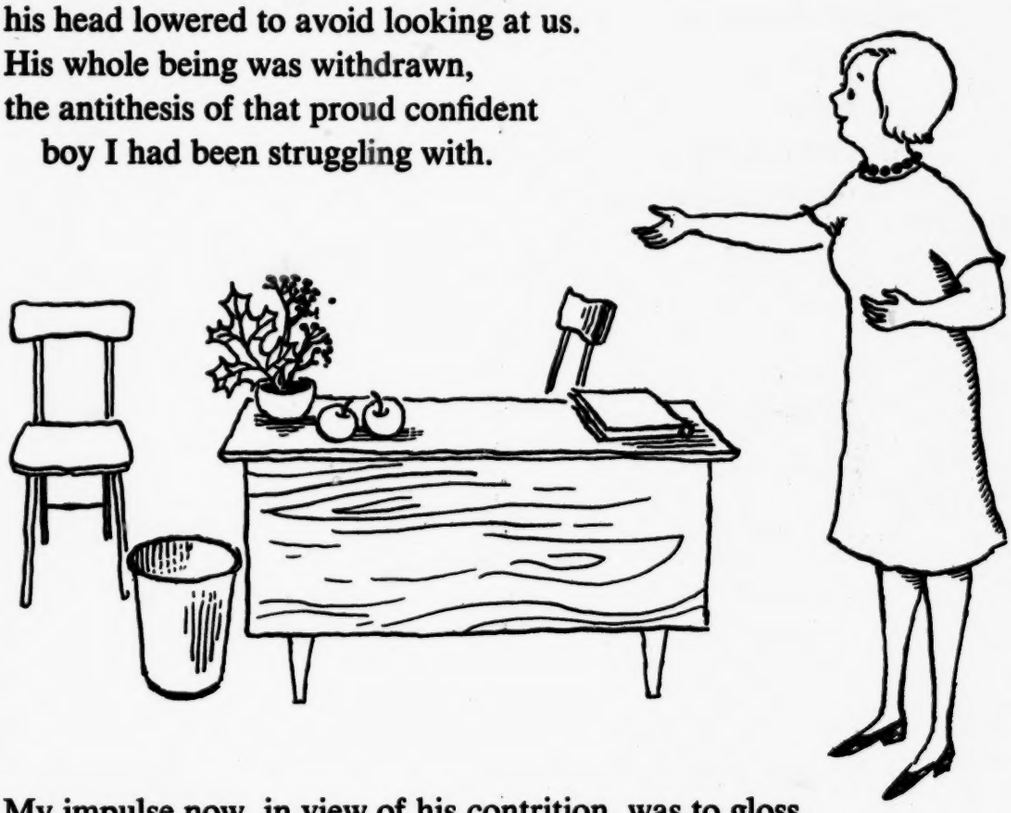
Fifteen minutes before classtime the next morning,
John and his father appeared for the conference.
I asked the other children who were already present
to play quietly in the far part of the room,
and then I beckoned John and Mr. Fulston
to join me at my desk.
Although I had heard Mr. Fulston speak
just a week before at our opening faculty meeting,
I did not, until now, perceive his personal warmth.

His eyes, metallic gray and penetrating,
were nonetheless gentle,
and his entire face lifted easily into a smile.
His posture immediately assured me
that he was non-partisan on this occasion,
and I was grateful.

"John and I are having some problems,"
I said straightforwardly,
"which must be resolved now
lest we start the year with a handicap."

Mr. Fulston nodded agreement and asked if he might sit down.
"Oh, yes, please do," I said apologetically.
"And John, won't you sit here?"
I got John a small seat and then drew my chair around to face him and his father.

It was then that I noticed the change that
had occurred in John since yesterday.
He sat there, terribly alone.
He was huddled down within himself,
his hands clasped tightly in his lap,
his head lowered to avoid looking at us.
His whole being was withdrawn,
the antithesis of that proud confident
boy I had been struggling with.



My impulse now, in view of his contrition, was to gloss
over our difficulties.
But, no! I thought. *Now is the time to reach an understanding with John.*
"As my note indicated, Mr. Fulston," I began,
"John was an hour and a half late to school yesterday morning.
When I inquired why, he answered offhandedly,
'Oh, I'm always late! We have a late breakfast every day.'
Nor is this the only occasion that he has been smarty with me.
His attitude from the beginning has been uncooperative and
sometimes arrogant."

"Yes," said Mr. Fulston, "John sometimes
tends to be assertive.
He's our third child, much much younger
than his brother and sister who now
are in college.
Undoubtedly we have enjoyed him so much
as he is,
that we haven't tried to change him.
But that doesn't excuse his being
evasive and flippant."

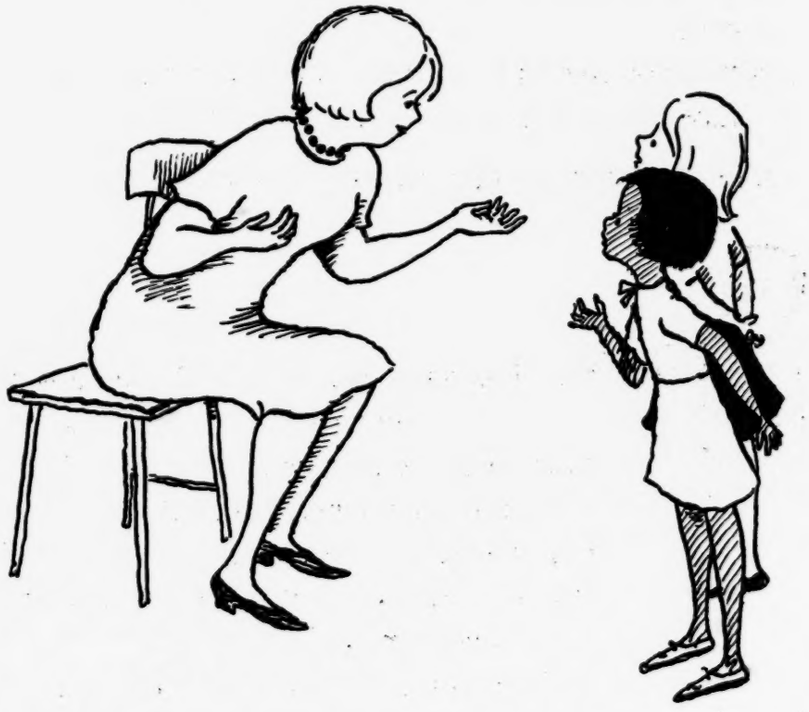
Although Mr. Fulston's words seemed to
condemn John's behavior,
there was no feeling of condemnation
in his voice.
He simply was explaining the situation.
I admired him for that.

Then turning to John, whose head was
still bowed,
he asked for an explanation of his
tardiness.

John took some time to begin:
"Well, I was – uh – I took a shortcut –
(his voice quivered)
I took a shortcut – through Kathy's yard –
and right near the parking – I found –
uh – I found –
(suddenly he burst into sobbing)
– uh – uh – I found – I found – uh –
an – an ant – an ant hill –
(his voice rose higher and higher)
– I found – uh – an ant hill – and –
and – I – I stopped – to watch the ants."

I was embarrassed to witness John's desolation.
His humility, which I had wished for and which
now was reality,
was not in any way a satisfaction to me.
John's sobbing attracted the children from their
play.
They gathered around curiously and uncomfortably,
staring first at John, then at us.

"Oh, children, do go on with your playing,"
I implored. "John doesn't feel well, but
he'll be better in a few minutes."



I also noticed that two mothers were standing at
the doorway, watching.
I quickly waved them good-by, which sent them on
their way.

When John's crying subsided, I asked if he understood
the need for being to school on time.
He nodded his head yes, without looking up.

"And do you understand that, hereafter, when I speak
to you, you are to answer politely?"
Again John nodded.

"Then, I think our talk is over, John.
Your father can go on to his work, and we can get to
ours.
Would you like to go to the bathroom to wash your
face? That will help you feel better."

John departed, his face buried in his arm crook.

Mr. Fulston, however, rose slowly, obviously
piecing together what he wanted to say.
"I am speaking now as John's father," he began,
"not as your superintendent.
I am aware that John sometimes can be difficult,
but, Mrs. Hoxie, he also has an amazing capacity
for involvements.
Perhaps you have not sensed this in him as yet,
but knowing him as I do,
I could have predicted
that an ant hill would be just as provocative
to John,
as a morning in kindergarten."

The implications of the conference left me
so shaken that,
although my teaching obligations kept me going,
the time passed without
a mark.
Certain questions kept gnawing at my awareness:

Why hadn't John felt free to tell me that he had found an ant hill?
Had I really turned this competent boy into the defeated figure that now slumped silently in his chair?
What was Mr. Fulston trying to tell me about the importance of involvement?
How, now, can I bridge back into John's confidence after this serious breach in our communication?

Nor was I the only one asking questions.
The children, too, were expressing their concerns:

"What did she do to you, John?"
"Are you really sick?"
"Will your father spank you, John?"
"Here, John. Have some of my juice."

If John was aware that he commanded the children's
sympathy,
he didn't reveal it.
He remained withdrawn and somber all morning.
The incident had dulled the day – for him and me
and all the children.

Introspection

At noon, after the children had been dismissed, I went directly to see Gloria Waterman, our principal.

"I have a problem, Gloria," I said flatly. "If you have no other plans for lunch, can we eat in and talk?"

I dislike sack lunches, but on coming to Jefferson School where every teacher carries his lunch (there being no cafeteria in our building), I learned to covet the noontime peace that "eating in," as we called it, provided.

Gloria was available, so I poured out my story. She was the one person in the building that I always could count on.

She could strip a problem to its kernel, and then view it with calmness and common sense.

That was the kind of support I needed right now.

"There's no use going to books for answers to your human problems, folks," she always said.

"Reach into your heart and you'll know what to do."

Sometimes she varied that statement by suggesting that we "look earnestly into children's faces" for solutions.

"You have a whole storehouse of insights to fall back on, if you only trust what you know."

Gloria was a big woman.
"No, I'm fat!" she quipped.
"I save up all this energy
to help us get through
the trouble spots
of the school year,
so be sure you call me
when you need support."
Then she would laugh
a deep rolling laugh
that allayed our doubts
and anxieties.

As we ate our sandwiches
that noon,
I poured out my story
from beginning to end.

"Well, he sounds like a
fine boy, Clara,"
she said heartily.
"Imagine a five-year-old
concentrating on an ant hill
for an hour and a half."

Wasn't it strange that I hadn't even thought of this?
I was so preoccupied with the struggle between
John and me
that I completely missed the unusual quality of his
performance.
Perhaps this is what Mr. Fulston meant when he described John
capable of deep involvements.

"When did things between you and John first go
wrong?" Gloria wanted to know.
That was the question I had been asking myself.

When had they gone wrong?
Was it when John arrived an hour and a half late,
or had the possibility for conflict shaped up
the first morning John came to kindergarten?
Ah, that's it! I disliked that boy's attitude
from the moment I first laid eyes on him.
He was so cocksure, so positive of himself.

"But, Clara, is there anything wrong in John's
being verbal?
I would hope – no I would covet the opportunity
to help every child to latch onto language just
as John has.
If children are to claim their humanity, it must
be with language,
for without language, they vegetate."

Yes, I had to admit that this was true!
Today I had seen John reduced to speechlessness,
drawn back into his inner self without an apparent
contact with the outside world,
with a mere nod of the head substituting for one of
his characteristically colorful statements,
and the remembrance of it drowned my victory.

"Clara, I once had a professor tell me that
if we are going to teach children to read,
we must begin by respecting the words in their mouths.
I've come to believe that is true of all teaching.
It must begin with respect for each child's language."

But how can I respect his words when his attitude
rankles me?
Imagine his telling me in our first encounter that
"everyone" knows my name!

"But isn't it interesting, Clara, that you remember
his exact words?
Even in your anger, you accorded him the right to be
an individual because of his language.
Chances are, you don't remember any other child's
comments as clearly as you remember John's.
This is the beginning of communication between you and
John, Clara.
Your next step is to turn it into something positive."

Bridging

Gloria was my polestar.
I came from her office that noon with a fresh
grip on myself.
It wasn't that I had lost my uneasy feelings
about John;
it was that I had new insights for interpreting
his language – his whole linguistic behavior.
I sensed that this new awareness was going to
make me a better teacher.

When the children came flocking
in the next morning,
I was able to engage them
in easy communication,
surprisingly unthreatened
by either their language
or their honesties.

"Hi, Mrs. Hoxie!"

Yesterday I would have stopped Ken and asked him to say good morning *rather than* hi, *this being one of my fetishes, but today, I was able to intake the cheerfulness of his greeting without allowing my bias to tarnish it.*

"Am I late? Tell me. I don't want to be late."

Shy little Angela! She also was caught up in my problem with John. Isn't it alarming, I asked myself, *that classroom altercations are so contagious?*

"Oh, good morning, Kelly. Aren't you going to say good morning to me?"

Now why did I force that child to speak when he obviously was deep in his own thoughts? How long must I continue trying to bend every child to my will?

"Mrs. Hoxie, why were you mean to John yesterday?"

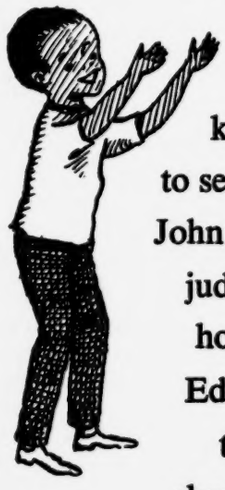
I was proud of myself. I accepted Marta's question as part of her curiosity, without feeling that I had been put on the spot. I answered her person to person, not as teacher to child.

And here came John.
"Good morning, John.
I am so glad to see you."
"Well, I'm here on time,"
he said loudly,
"but it's not very stimulating."
"Maybe we can do something about that,"
I said, turning to the entire class.
"Children, what can we do
to make our room more stimulating?"
"I can hammer," said Homer.
"I like to hammer."
"Read to us, Mrs. Hoxie," said Patricia.
"Oh, please, read to us."
"I like to cook in the kitchen," said Molly Ann.
"I wish we could go to John's ant hill," said Seth.
A cry of approval came from the children.
"Let's go to John's ant hill!" they begged.
"I like ants," said Chyrul.
"Not me. I hate ants," said Hiles.
"We have ants in our kitchen," said Bobby.
"How big is an ant?" I asked, taking my cue
from the children's interest in the subject.
"About this big," said Eddie, marking off a large
segment of space with his hands.
"You're crazy," said Seth. "There are big ants
and little ants, but no ant is that big.
They are about an inch long."
"Black ants are bigger than red ants," John said.

"How big is an inch," I asked. "Who can show me?"

"I can," said John. "An inch is this long."
He showed me on his finger an approximation
of an inch. Then he added thoughtfully,
"If you have a ruler like my brother's,
I can show you exactly."

Mary and Bubber, having lost interest in the group discussion,
wandered off to the costume box to play.



Several other children followed them.
My inclination was to call them back,
but I told myself to keep calm and
observe the children to see what I could learn.
My encounter with John had made clear to me
my narrow bias in judging children's behavior.
"How do ants dig a hole in the ground?"
Eddie was asking.
"How do you think they do it?" I countered.
"Well, they don't have shovels," Eddie said.
"They do it with their arms," John shouted.
"They carry the dirt out with their arms."

Isn't John an amazing child, I thought.
Here he is, wholeheartedly engaged in our classroom activities
without any negative reactions to yesterday.
What inner strength this child must have!

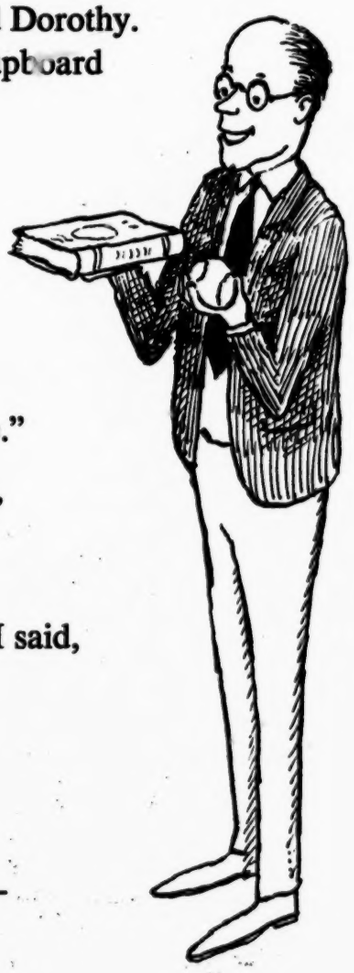
As the pooling of information about ants continued,
I listened and reacted and injected helpful questions
to release the children to more of what they already knew,
but I also was thinking of the children
in the other part of the room.

Even in their play at the woodworking table, at the easel
and at the costume box,
they had little to say.
Were these children non-verbal, or was there an abundance
of unuttered language bouncing around in their heads,
just as there was, this moment, in mine?
If so, then what should I be doing
to release that language into speech?

Fortunately, Gloria had planned an unstructured session
for our first faculty meeting of the new year.
We met in the library after school,
and Dorothy had a plate of homemade cookies
to "sweeten the affair," as she put it.

"Well, what's going on these opening days," Gloria asked.
"School has started and there's scarcely been a peep!"

"It's what's not going on that bothers me," said Dorothy.
"I've been waiting five years to get a new cupboard
for my art supplies, and I'm still waiting.
I suppose I'm in for another year
of climbing up to my cloak-room cubbies
to store my large-size paper."



"That's what keeps you slim, Dorothy,"
said Lindle.
"Don't complain
or Gloria will charge you for health service."

Everyone laughed, even George Helpern,
our elementary school psychologist,
who was usually quiet.

"Well, since George is visiting with us today," I said,
"I'd like some information from him . . .
about something new I'm trying this year,
but it's posing problems."

"What kind of problems?" George asked.

"I'm trying to give my children more freedom—
more room to do their own thinking.
It's more difficult than it sounds."

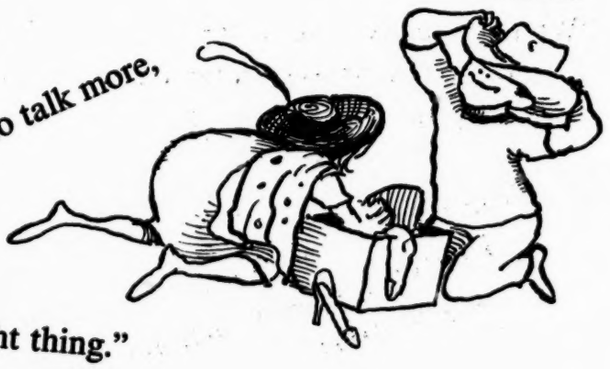
George frowned. "You must be more explicit, Clara."

"Well, this is what I have in mind," I began again.

Recalling yesterday's situation
stirred up the anxiety I felt at the time.
"Yesterday half of my class was deeply involved
in a discussion about ants. The other half wasn't,

so I permitted those children to drift off to other activities.

Oh, they didn't disturb the ant group.
They were quiet enough,
but I do wonder, since they are children
who should be learning to talk more,



whether I did the right thing."

"Well, Clara, we could spend the year discussing that question,"
George said, "but in the first place,
it's not easy to separate verbal and non-verbal behavior.
How closely did you observe the children in their play?
Wasn't there quite a bit of talking going on?"

"That's a good point, George," said Gloria.
"It's possible that even the child
who sits looking out a window
may be telling himself what he is seeing."

"But I'm concerned about helping children use words
to express a point of view," I said.
"We have an obligation to help children use language well.
If I relinquish some of my teaching time
to let children operate on their own, as I did yesterday,
am I being fair to the children?"

George hesitated, thinking how to say what he wanted to say.
"What is teaching, Clara?
I'm not sure that I know the difference
between teaching and learning," he said.
"There are only human beings in a classroom,
all strung out on a long range of becoming,
all headed the same direction,
each wanting to become something more,
something better than he is."

"What we really need in the classroom," said Gloria,
"is more honest-to-goodness dialogue between people.
That's the way children learn language."

"But that's a risk," I said.
"How do you know that any language learning
is going on?"

"Oh, Clara, you're being naive," said Dorothy.
"You knew something valuable was happening
to those children who left your discussion group,
or you would have called them back."

"As I understand it, Clara," said George,
"you're trying to release children to talking, to language.
You're trying to develop language ways in your classroom
that have some sort of human thrust.
Well, if that is so,
you have no choice but to trust your intuitive judgments,
because this creative kind of teaching
has never been fully spelled out on paper.
It can only emerge, blossom
in the response of a sensitive teacher
to the questings of children."

"But what about my limited talkers?" I persisted.

"Involve them," said George. "Involve them in living,
in doing, in perceiving.
Involve them in feeling good about themselves.
Let them explore, react, reconnoiter, even fail,
but just manage it so they are eager to try again."

"That's easier said than done," I said.

"You're forgetting that you're a teacher," said George,
"and that's what teaching is all about.
You, the teacher—every teacher—creates the safeguard
when you create an environment in which
children are free to discover themselves,
in which they establish rapport with their dreams,
in which they perfect skill in becoming
what they find they can do successfully.

All else in a classroom day is naught
if a child goes home at night
feeling negative about himself
with no dream of becoming successful."

"And that's why teaching is so rewarding," said Gloria.
"A teacher by her faith in children,
by her continuous search
for language ways and curriculum ways
that release children rather than hinder them
performs the miracle of human connection."

For a moment the group was thoughtfully silent.

"Well, please pass the cookies again.
I need a solvent to get all this philosophy down,"
sniffed Dorothy.

"Yes, eat up, girls," said Lenore, "—oh, excuse me—
and gentlemen.
If I understand George correctly,
he's prescribing a curriculum that's calorie free."

George smiled.

"George, I'm getting the feeling of what you're saying,"
I said cautiously,
"but let's translate it
into classroom techniques.
Bear with me now if this sounds stupid,
but I'm trying to understand."
I thought back to John's ant hill.
"Suppose I took my children on a field trip
to see an ant hill . . ."

"Oh, Clara!
Field trips are passé.
Even in kindergarten,"
said Lenore.

"Not at all," said Clara. "There may be some doubt
about a field trip that is teacher dominated,
but there are valid reasons
for a field trip that grows out of
interests and questions of the children."

"A field trip can be many things," George agreed
"But, whatever else, it is a language laboratory.
Look what happens when the children
have their 'daily field trip'
with Lindle on the playground."

"Now we know what's going on
during your phys ed periods, Lindle," said Dorothy.
"You're teaching grammar."

"Well, you may call it grammar,"
Lindle said in his Kentucky drawl,
"but it sounds like good child talk to me.
I wonder if you're aware of the language skill
kids develop on the playground."

"How could we miss it!" said Lenore.
"We have to drill it out of them
when they return to class."

"It would do us all good," said George,
"to get out on the playground more often.
This is one place where we can truly see children
as users of language.
There they are free to retain all of the color and zest
of their home-instilled language,
at the same time amalgamating it
with all of the new expressions and structures
that they are encountering in the classroom."

"And in their associations with other children," said Dorothy.

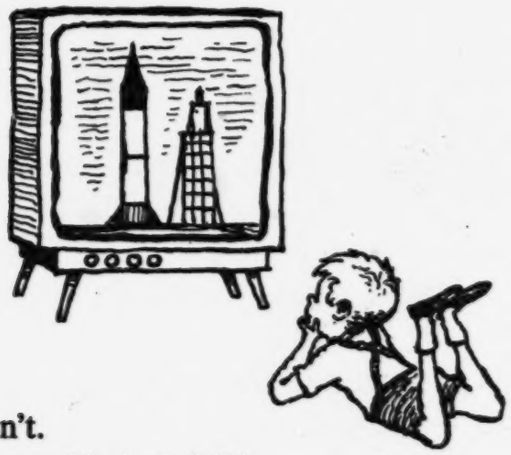
"This is what I'm sensing about a field trip to the ant hill,"
I said.
"It's true that my annual field trip
to the corner mail box
suddenly seems obsolete,
but I'm really challenged
by the language dimensions
of a trip to the ant hill."

"It occurs to me, Clara," said George,
"that the highly conceptual nature of classroom discussions
forces some children into a non-verbal posture.
Maybe some of the children in your class, Clara,
who appeared to be non-verbal when the group
was abstracting its ant experiences
would be more verbal in another language situation."

"Yes," said Gloria. "It will be interesting to hear
how some of your seemingly non-verbal children respond
when they are actually seeing the ants
and when they're engaged in informal conversation
around the ant hill."

"In our concern for non-verbal children,"
said George,
"let's not overlook the learnings
that are offered to verbal children
by a field trip of this kind.
They, too, need firsthand experience,
but for a different reason.
Children who use language so easily
often need experience to validate their concepts."

"I'm not following you, George," said Helen.
"Are you saying their language
doesn't grow out of experience?"



"Precisely. Very often it doesn't.
Television has given us a new kind of child
to work with,
one who picks up language patterns easily
and seems to handle concepts
whether or not he has had background experience to support them.
His language, therefore, can actually become a trap.
To others he always seems to know so much more
than he himself knows that he knows.
If we permit him to persist
in substituting language for experience,
he may never learn to ground
his seeming academic success in reality.
It's the connection between language and experience
that offers children human wholeness."

"Yes, that's so," said Rowena.
"Every summer at camp I see some children fall apart
at a square dance or on the archery range
or someplace else
where language abstraction does not insure their success."

"That reminds me of a child in third grade last year,"
said Florence. "He became a troublemaker
whenever he didn't have an audience.
He'd hit, push, pinch,
anything to make people talk to him."

"Have we been saying, George,
that I don't have to hold my children to a discussion
when we return from our trip to the ant hill?" I asked.
"Well, Clara, you don't have to do everything at once,"
George suggested.
"At some time you will want to help your children
verbalize those things that were important to them.
But it need not always be in discussion.
Don't you have a poem or a song about ants
that would give them language
to experiment with?"

"I'm sure that I do," I said.

"One of your children playing dress-up
might sing a doll to sleep,
using lines from an ant poem.
This, too, is a form of verbalizing."

"And, of course, you could read them a story
like 'The Ant, the Lamb, the Cricket and the Mouse,' "
said Gloria.
"A fantasy like this gives children another way
for thinking and talking about ants."

"Isn't it interesting," said Celia,
"that we're talking of feeding language
into the children
rather than expecting to pull it
out of them?"

"Clara, are you primarily concerned
in helping the children learn about ants?
Or do you have some other purpose in mind?"

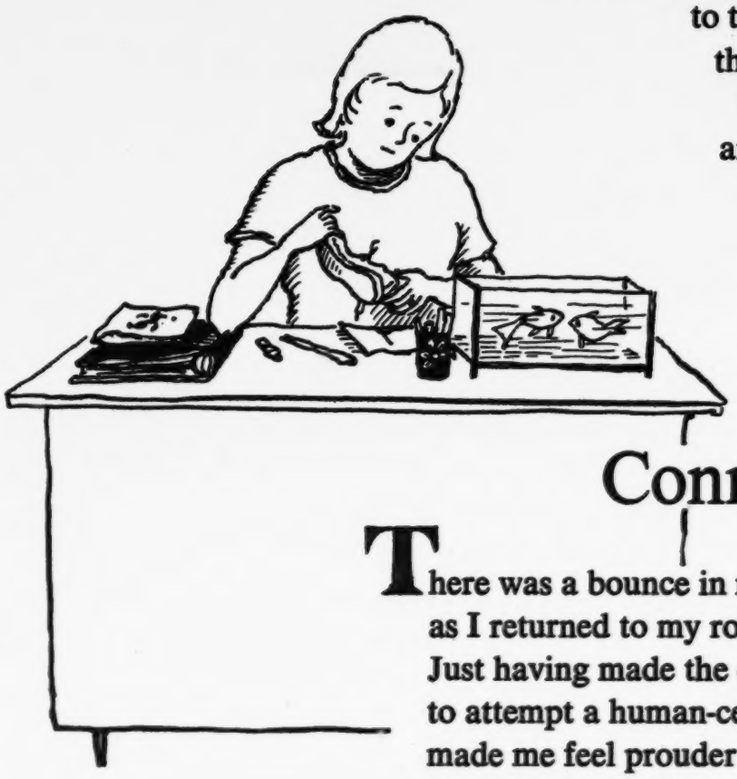
"Well, I have two purposes, I think.
First, the children are genuinely interested
in learning about John's ant hill,
and I want them to have both
the experience and the language
that go with this interest.
Second—now let me think
how to say this—
second, the children asked
to see the ant hill,
and I want to experiment this year
by letting the curriculum partly grow
out of their yearnings."

"You don't sound like you, Clara," said Dorothy.
"Well, Dorothy, I'm sure I don't."

"Why don't you go back to teaching phonics in kindergarten,
Clara?" Ruby said.
"I always liked getting your children in first grade.
They had such a good start in reading."

"Now, Ruby, let's not go into that again," said Gloria.
"We did research on phonics in kindergarten
for five years,
and all of our tests showed
that you couldn't tell the difference in third grade
between the child who had phonics in kindergarten
and the one who didn't.
Language instruction in kindergarten
must tune the children's ears to sentence structure,
to language flexibility, to widening vocabulary,
to beauty and hope,
not to the mechanics of word analysis."
"No, Ruby," I said," I'm through with phonics in kindergarten.
It was putting the cart before the horse."

"I think Clara has raised some interesting points today
that we might keep as a continuing theme of study,"
said George.
"How can we help children—and ourselves—
connect language and experience
so they are mutually supporting?
Contrary to our notion that experience must always precede language
and that language is always the culminating activity,
we now see this never-ending play between the two.
At one moment language may validate experience,
while at another moment,
experience may be needed to validate language.
It is a continuing interchange
that lasts the course of a lifetime.
. . . And a person's learning is whole
to the degree
that these
interchanges
are provided for."



Connection

There was a bounce in my step
as I returned to my room that afternoon.
Just having made the decision
to attempt a human-centered curriculum
made me feel prouder to be a teacher
than I had ever felt before.

Now let me see.
What are the
basic premises?

1) Children's comfortable language is the starting point
in a school language program.
2) New language patterns must first be anchored in children's ears
with abundant oral activity
so that children can later transpose those patterns
into their own thinking, speaking, reading and writing.
3) Poems and stories are a prime source of speech models
that children can imitate in exploring new patterns of language
and in discovering more about the structure of our language.
4) Firsthand experiences, like a field trip,
will be for some children
a validation of concepts they already are verbalizing;
for other children,
the experiences will be events that lead to language.
5) Group discussion, long overused as the only means
of developing conceptual language,
must be balanced by experiences
in creative dramatics, creative writing, choral reading,
storytelling, independent research,
and other uses of language
which also enhance the development and expression of concepts.
6) Pure verbal experiences must be balanced
with less verbal experiences
such as painting, dancing, pantomine, sculpting,
music, rhythms, and play without talk
which evoke thoughts and feelings
that strongly influence the mainstream of language development.
7) The goal of language instruction
is not to develop language skill in and of itself,
but to help children claim their humanity
through the use of language.

I remember how pleased I was
taking the children to the ant hill.
The day had favored us with warm sunshine
and enough helping mothers
to make the trip comfortable.
The children were fascinated by the ants.
They watched them, poked at them, talked to them
and finally took turns blocking their trailways
with sticks and pebbles
to see how they would cope.

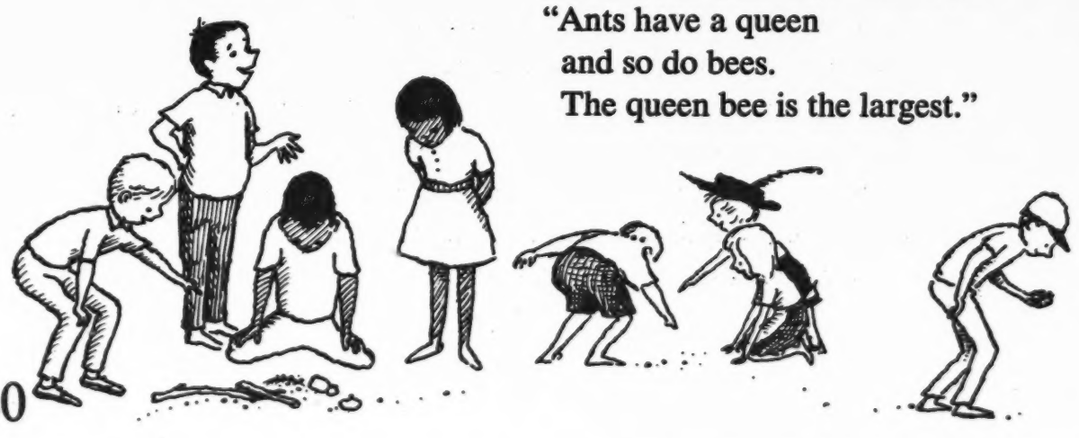
"Go around it! Go around it!" Little Burt urged a large black ant.
"Your babies need you at home."

John was fully in charge,
cautioning everyone to look where he stepped,
for he might, in John's words,
"squash the queen ant."

"Ants can't be a queen," said Mary.
"A queen is a lady with a long dress."

Yes, I told myself,
Mary who loves to dress up
would know that.
Isn't it interesting that the word queen
triggered her into a response
that clearly reveals
one of her strong interests?

"You're crazy, Mary," said Seth.
"Ants have a queen
and so do bees.
The queen bee is the largest."



Yes, I told myself, *I need but listen to Seth*
and I'll discover his scientific bent.
His language, is the mirror of his being.

I felt a tug at my skirt and leaned down to Angela.
"Why for the ants have a queen?" she asked softly.

Yes, quiet little Angela, with her home-rooted language,
could also frame a question of scientific inquiry.

"Stand back, everybody," John commanded.
"Stand back and let Mrs. Hoxie have a look."
Then he added confidentially,
"Shall I tell you about them, Mrs. Hoxie?"

As I stood watching the ants scurrying back and forth,
John gave an amazing description of what was happening.
It suddenly occurred to me that I had just discovered
the source of John's great strength as a human being.
He has a wonderful capacity
for connecting language and experience.
What was it that George said in our faculty meeting?
Oh, yes! "It's the connection between language and experience
that offers children human wholeness."
Isn't it interesting that this child
who started out as a problem to me
is now my teacher?
He is helping me connect my language with experience.

When we returned to the classroom,
"ant hill" conversations sprang up voluntarily,
sometimes within small groups,
sometimes within large groups,
sometimes as a bona fide science discussion,
sometimes as dramatic play,
sometimes to re-establish the memory of the field trip.
Sometimes I provided leadership for the discussions,
sometimes they were child directed.
I only had to listen
to know that all of the children, even the quiet ones,
were taking on new vocabulary and sentence patterns
and that each conversation tended to cross-pollinate another.

On the second day after the excursion,
the time seemed right to read a poem about ants.
"Here is a poem," I said,
"that John and Seth and Angela—
oh, yes, and you too, Eddie—
will particularly enjoy.
It's about ants."

"I want to hear it, too," said Helsabeth.
A group of children gathered on the rug around me.
As I began reading,
I observed that many children elsewhere in the room
were listening intently
while seeming to continue their other activities.

Ants
One day I found
Upon the ground
A little mound
With ants around,
Running and hurrying,
Busy and scurrying.
I watched them come;
I watched them go;
I laughed as some
Ran to and fro
With a crumb of cake
I gave them to take
Into their mound
Upon the ground.
—Zhenya Gay

Poetry had always been a natural part of my kindergarten curriculum.
This was not the first poem the children had heard,
but this was the first poem that I had chosen
because it provided language patterns and vocabulary
about a subject that the children were interested in.

Their response was immediate.
"Read it again," they said. "Read it again."
Whatever pleasure I derived from reading the poem
could not compare with the pleasure
the children got from hearing it and saying it along with me.

Each day thereafter
some child would ask for "the ant poem,"
and everyone would chime in as I read it.
They especially liked

. . . Running and hurrying,
Busy and scurrying . . .

although they had some difficulty
pronouncing the strange sequence of sounds
in *hurrying* and *scurrying*.
But from the outset,
they claimed as their own

One day I found
Upon the ground
A little mound . . .

to which they added
"Of ants!"

Understandably, this became our accepted way
of saying the poem
because *with ants around*
did not sound right to the children.

Their change of that line, I reasoned,
is a sound linguistic activity.
When a language pattern is apparent and pleasing to children's ears,
they have no difficulty making it their own.
But, if it isn't, they either ignore it or change it.

Then I experienced another revelation:
the children were naturally analyzing
both the poem's structure and its meanings.

"One day I found
Upon the ground
A little mound
Of ants,"
Rose said rhythmically
to her tippy-toe dancing.

"It wasn't a little mound,"
said Kenneth.
"It was a big old mound."
"Yes," said Rose, "it was a big old mound."
Then she went right back to saying the poem
the way that she had learned it.

"It was a big old mound, wasn't it, Mrs. Hoxie?" Ken asked.

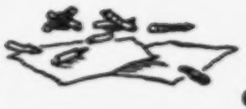
"Do you mean the mound in the poem or the mound in Kathy's yard?"

Ken had some difficulty differentiating the two,
but at last it became clear to me
that the mound in the yard was his reality.
Aha! Ken has a preference for visualizing.
I wonder if he will be one of those children
who does better in geometry than in algebra.
Rose's reality is obviously the language of the poem.
Will her preference for conceptualizing
also influence her math performance?
Will she do better in algebra than in geometry?

Then one day I came upon a group of crayons
that had been left on the floor.
Instinctively I said,

"Today I found
Upon the ground
A little mound
Of crayons.
Won't someone please
pick them up?"

The children's joy
in associating the
with a new context
that I instinctively found



poetic experience
was so evident
other occasions
to transform parts of poems and stories and songs
to fit into conversational situations in the classroom.
The children loved this kind of playing with language
and the good fellowship that it engendered,
and they, too, began changing poems and story lines to fit their purposes.
One day near the end of the school year,
Gloria came in to hear the children
do some choral reading.
Her delight was so evident to them
that they wanted to go on and on—
which they did.

Later, after the children had left, Gloria said to me,
"It doesn't seem very long ago that you were in my office, Clara,
overwhelmed by the thought of having to deal
with a linguistically gifted child.
Now I'm facing a linguistically gifted teacher
who has made language in the classroom
relate intimately to children's lives."

"Yes," I said, "I sense the change that has occurred in me.
I'll never go back to my old ways of teaching."

"You lived through the risk," Gloria went on,
"of putting some of your strongly held values
out on the table for examination
only to discover that they didn't suffice.
It was a painful experience, but it got you in touch
with children as they really are.
My hat, if I had one, would be off to you!"

I appreciated what Gloria had to say,
but the full impact of the change that had occurred in me
was brought home when John announced one day,
"I'm not sure that I'll like first grade next year.
The kids say it's not very stimulating."
He fussed around for several days about having to leave kindergarten,
but finally he accepted the move with just one regret.
"I really hate to leave you, Mrs. Hoxie," he said.
"I was just beginning to know what you look like."

Bobby
Little Burt
Mary
Molly Ann
Helsabeth
Alex
Kenneth
Eddie
Maud
Homer
Kelly